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ABSTRACT

The influence of skills and education on work choices of Muscogee (Creek) women was examined in an ethnographic study during which 16 Muscogee women with educational levels ranging from an eighth grade boarding school education to a master's degree participated in multiple personal guided interviews. Only two of the women were not high school graduates. Criteria for inclusion in the sample included a variety of job categories, work venues, pay options, and both tribal and non-tribal employment. The women discussed work in the following four domains: home work, public work, community/volunteer work, and cultural/home jobs. Education had a direct relationship to the women's ability to secure employment. The women gave high priority to formal education through the high school level. The women noted positive and negative consequences of becoming educated. Positive consequences included gaining the respect of one's elders, and negative consequences included limiting one's chances for marriage within the tribe. Positive effects of the government boarding school experience noted by the women included making friendships with other Indian children and learning necessary life skills. Negative effects of the experience that were mentioned by the women included acculturation and not learning their native language. (Contains 15 references.) (MN)

Influence of Skills and Education on Work Choices of Muscogee (Creek) Women

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Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to share a portion of the results of a recent ethnographic study of Muscogee (Creek) women's perceptions of work. Specifically, this paper deals with one aspect of that study, that is, their acquisition of skills and education and how this affected their work choices.

Theoretical Framework: The complete study was framed by culture theory, identity theory, and expectancy theory, though this paper focuses on culture theory as the guiding theoretical influence. The term workforce diversity encompasses many issues, including culture, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual and religious orientation, minority and social status, and physical and mental disabilities (Thomas, 1994). Work orientations develop at a young age, and they are influenced highly by one's socio-cultural referents (Hofstede, 1994; Kelly, 1991; Patterson, Sochting & Marcia, 1992). In fact, Hofstede (1994) and Laurent (1986) have suggested that one's cultural heritage may be more influential in shaping occupational choices than organizational cultures. As a result, the Muscogee culture may have been a major contributor to these women's perceptions and expectations of work. Part of my focus for this study was to determine to what extent their cultural heritage influenced their career decisions. For this study, culture was defined as:

> A learned, socially transmitted set of behavioral standards. It is self-expressed and shared by individuals through their personal values, norms, activities, attitudes, cognitive processes, interpretation of symbols, feelings, ideas, reactions, and morals (Morris, Davis & Allen, 1994, p. 70).

This definition suggests that the group's culture gives its members a sense of shared identity, a common past, and a sense of belonging. The cultural identity of these women, that is, of being Creek, gave them their values and beliefs systems. These are important for potential teachers or employers to know in order to motivate them as students or employees.

Methodology: D'Andrea (1994) indicated that the use of non-culturally normed instruments was not appropriate for research with Native Americans. Therefore, qualitative methods were used to overcome these norming barriers. Ethnographic interviewing provided the emic or informant's perspective, giving a voice to these women, thereby facilitating their "rediscovery of womanhood" (Greenman, 1996, p. 24). The focus questions guiding the research related to how they defined work, what influenced their work choices, what motivated them to do their chosen work, and how they perceived the dual effects of gender and ethnicity on their success as workers and on their career choices. Over a period of several months I conducted multiple personal guided interviews (Spradley, 1979). The educational levels of these 16 women ranged from an eighth grade boarding school education to a master's degree from a public university. Only two of the participants were not high school graduates. A rubric was used to guide the purposeful sampling process; criteria for inclusion included a variety of

job categories (including politics, education, medicine, social work, homemaking, crafts), work venues (including home work), pay options (employer paid, gratis, self-employment), and both tribal and nontribal employment. Educational level was not a criterion for inclusion.

Data Collection and Analysis: To ensure accuracy of the findings, several methods of data collection were used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of methods (Ethnographic interviewing, participant/ unobtrusive observations, and document analysis) provided a means for verifying information received by one method through use of other methods. Observations took place in a variety of situations, including a tribal preschool, traditional ceremonies and dances, church services, tribal community centers, tribal council meetings, tribal offices, a job fair, Creek homes, and powwows. Document analysis included a review of tribal documents, local and tribal newspapers, and materials from the tribal cultural preservation office library and the Creek Council House Museum library. Constant comparative method of data analysis was used.

Results and Conclusions: Studying this unique culture shed light on how cultural referents led to differences in workplace behavior and expectations, while increasing our knowledge about this group of minority women. Differences in value systems were found, substantiating previous work by Red Horse (1980), Edwards & Edwards, (1980), Williams & Ellison (1994), and others. These included differences in communication and interactions; leadership styles; their emphasis on community over individualism; their lack of emphasis on individual competition; their focus on harmony within the tribe, the individual, and nature; spirituality; gender role designations; time perceptions; and attachment to homeland.

The participants discussed work in four domains: home work, public work, community/volunteer work, and cultural/home jobs. The skills used in home work related to their rural agricultural upbringing and were taught by nuclear and/or extended family members of both genders, though typically by female relatives. A typical statement about types of work they did growing up was this, "I learned to dress the squirrels; I learned to cut up chicken and turkey, ... render lard." "Working out in public," that is, working outside the home for pay, was initially based on the skills they learned at home, including jobs like waitress, housekeeper, and other typically female dominated occupations. As one woman put it, "That's all I knew how to do." Public work options expanded and job satisfaction increased as they received more specialized education and skills and were able to move into better paying jobs. Community/ volunteer work, for pay or gratis, was important to the participants, as it enabled them to do something to help others, an often expressed value related to work. Types of community/volunteer work included working with women's charitable organizations, traditional dancing and craft work, teaching and translating the Muskokee language, and other work in which they were able to help to preserve the culture. The fourth arena mentioned by the participants was their work in home jobs and cultural work. The emphasis on cultural preservation through craft work, such as beading or metal work, was discussed by 6 of the 16 women. Three of them received formal training, the other three were self-taught or had learned from elders. Every woman mentioned cultural preservation in some way. Those who attended ceremonial ground functions were

familiar with the various types of work assigned to women at these functions. For example, one woman described how important it was to plan for feeding the family and guests at the grounds.

Education had a direct relationship to their ability to secure employment. Formal education through the high school level has typically been of high priority to Creek people. One's level of education affected her ability to find work and limited or expanded her work choices. They expressed varying experiences in the formal education received in public schools, boarding schools, and colleges and technical schools. One woman expressed her thoughts about why education is important for Creek women in this way: "I wanted to prove that education was important to me...I know later I knew that, to get anything, you have to have an education. As an Indian woman, you have to work harder to get anything, because traditionally, the men are the ones that did the work (outside the home)."

Positive and negative consequences of becoming educated were noted. One woman shared that, through education, she gained the respect of her elders; however, she felt that her abilities as a result of that education were not appreciated by the tribal members in her peer group. Another woman stated that, when a Creek woman goes away to a public university to become educated, she is respected for being educated, but doing so, limits her chances for marriage within the tribe. This corroborates a similar notion mentioned by Medicine (1988).

Their boarding school experiences were positive and negative. All of the women over age 70 had attended Indian boarding schools. Several shared information indicating that they had been punished for speaking the Muskokee language. Only one of the participants under age 50 had attended Indian boarding school. She stated that her attendance there was a positive experience as it taught her self-discipline. One woman found a more stable lifestyle at boarding school than what she had in her broken home. Other positive experiences mentioned included the friendships they made with other Indian children, the life skills they were forced to learn, and the work experience they obtained. One of the most important influences boarding school had was to place more emphasis on panIndian customs and less on Creek customs, especially related to speaking the native tongue. It is important to remember that one of the main purposes of government boarding schools was to teach Indian children how to interact with the prevalent culture. The ultimate focus was assimilation and acculturation. As a result, many of these children forgot or never learned their native languages. Today there is a strong emphasis on learning the native language as part of their efforts to preserve the Muscogee (Creek) culture.

Implications: The value differences affect how we structure educational activities for indigenous learners. For example, there must be consideration for the individualism/ collectivism dimension when preparing curricula and classroom activities. Earley (1994) noted that collectivists performed better in group-focused training, while individualists valued self-focused training. It follows that Muscogee (Creek) people, then, might benefit from participatory small group training opportunities. Consideration should be given to these differences in value systems to ensure that education is a motivating experience that encourages retention. In this way, we can attempt to overcome the high dropout rate found in this minority group.

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